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Reflections on the Social Psychologists' Video Camera

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absence within individual articles and the state of research in the field generally; despite the effectiveness of the case study of a limited time period and its relation to historical events, we have not ventured into the study of influences, an internal history of associations within the tradition and community of committed documentary: among filmmakers, among political communities, among traditions of social action. We do not reinvent ourselves regardless of the "radical" stance and its claim to invent; the idea of a radical tradition put forward by this book makes that evident. Waugh's own piece is a fine instance of a contextual history, although it is not as broad an intellectual history as one might hope for on *The Spanish Earth*. But a blend of the theoretical and historical might be stimulated by the goal of explaining a film's inheritance. A study of a collective like California Newsreel or Kartemquin in Chicago, whose work and styles of filmic representation has evolved with its financial, production, and political practices, might show us how committed documentary evolves historically. It would also demonstrate the necessary self-consciousness about social practice for this kind of filmmaking—in production, distribution, and exhibition to specific audiences.

Waugh, however, proves his point. We *do* have a tradition of scholarship in this area with a high level of theoretical sophistication. I am inclined to agree with him that feminist circles have made a decisive contribution to this, probably because the speed, pressure, and diversity of the movement have fostered a need for metacommunicative analysis. I would have liked to have seen even more excerpts from current debates in this vein. Barbara Martineau's piece about "talking heads" offered a significant focus but shed little light of a theoretical nature. Similarly, Julianne Burton's catalog promised a theoretical discussion but produced a detailed description with shorthand conclusions rather than closely reasoned arguments about what is and is not "democratizing" and why. While an occasional selection embodied the passion behind the phrase "committed documentary" with its goal of changing the world (Hennebelle, Georgakas, Braderman, and perhaps Kaplan do this), too often the style of writing is "academic," betraying the vitality of the films and their political concerns. One thinks of the contrast of Grierson's writing compared to the infectious energy that the Canadian Film Board's *Grierson* was able to seize from his speaking body. I am not talking about gushing with sophomore zeal but the media journalist's ability to convey with concentrated intensity the *heat and light* of the experience of *Hour of the Furnaces* or *The Battle of Chile*, masterpieces of engaged filmmaking. Authors like James Agee or Adrienne Rich distill their insight with a passion that makes us see. Not only students but scholars need to understand and experience the *pleasure* of this genre, not just analytical rigor, which we also need, but its own *joissance*.

Reflections on the Social Psychologists' Video Camera

Review Essay by Norman K. Denzin
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This article is based on a paper prepared for the session "Media and Social Research," chaired by Dan Miller, at the Midwest Sociology Meetings, St. Louis, Missouri, April 11, 1985. It is a response to a viewing and "reading" of the video tape *Studying Social Processes, Parts 1 and 2* (Carl Couch, Producer; Mari Molseed and Joel Powell, Associate Producers; David Maines, Editorial Consultant). Copyright © University of Iowa, 1984.

Sol Worth (1981:111) reminds us that educational films have been used for instructional purposes in United States grade schools since 1918, in high schools since the 1930s, and in colleges since the 1960s. Anthropologists have been producing such films at least since the 1940s, when Mead and Bateson (1942) produced their famous photographic study of Balinese character (see Worth 1981). Sociologists have more recently entered the field; Becker's essays on photography and sociology (e.g., 1974) and Goffman's (1976) study of gender advertisements are recent instances. Carl Couch and his students have been utilizing video film records of interactions in small-group laboratories since the early 1970s (e.g., Couch and Hintz 1975). A visual sociology, or a sociology that relies upon photographic and video film records of social life, has thus come into existence. The most recent production from the Iowa group is the newly released film *Studying Social Processes, Parts 1 and 2*, produced in 1984 by Carl Couch and his coproducers, Mari Molseed and Joel Powell, with David Maines the editorial consultant. This is an educational film, intended to teach sociologists how to conduct laboratory studies of interpersonal and group negotiations. I offer a review and interpretation of that film. I shall take up in order the following topics: (1) the distinction between visual sociology and a sociology of visual communication; (2) the sociologist as filmmaker; (3) *how* a film "means"; and (4) the place of the video camera in the field of social psychology.

Visual Sociology and a Sociology of Visual Communication

A film is simultaneously a means of communication and an instrument of instruction. A film is a cultural and symbolic form that, when released by the filmmaker, enters the communication process (Worth 1981:119). As such, a film may be used to illustrate patterns of cultural and social life. This was the use that Mead and Bateson (1942) and Goffman (1976)

found for their photographic records. Such uses produce a visual sociology and anthropology. A visual sociologist or anthropologist attempts, with a personal or visual and video record, to present objective patterns of human group life that would not otherwise be produced or be available. Couch (1984) argues that such records yield "pure" specimens of social action that can be repeatedly examined so that the underlying geometric patterns and forms of social interaction can be discovered.

Worth (1981:192-193) notes that the term *visual anthropology* (and sociology) has led many social scientists to believe that they are being scientists when they turn their camera and its lens on a sequence of social action and capture that sequence on tape. Indeed, a hierarchy of "scientific films" has been produced, with uncut, unorganized footage being "more" scientific than edited footage or "reenacted" sequences captured on tape. For the most part, however, sociologists and anthropologists have not been trained as filmmakers. Their films and photos seldom differ from those that a photojournalist or laboratory technician would take. Their films are scientific only when they bring their "scientific jargon" into place and begin to interpret what they have filmed (Becker 1974).

Worth suggests that there is a great deal of value in visually recorded data, "so long as we know what it is that we recorded, so long as we are aware of how and by what rules we chose our subject matter, and so long as we are aware of, and make explicit, how we organized the various units of film from which we will do our analysis" (Worth 1981:193-194).

Couch and his associates are quite explicit on these issues. They tell us that all that is needed to complete a laboratory, video study of social processes is to have (1) two sets of persons, (2) completing the same unit of social action, in (3) two different contexts; (4) a well-lighted room, a wide-lens video camera, and a microphone; and (5) a sociologist with a sociological imagination. Such conditions will produce, they contend, "high fidelity" data, which unaided observations cannot yield.

But while Worth praises the value of visually recorded data, he introduces a problematic that is not considered by the Iowa group. This problematic shifts attention from a visual sociology to a sociology of visual communication. A camera does not record what is out there to be recorded; rather it records "what is *in there*, in the anthropologist's (and sociologist's) mind, as a trained observer puts observations of (what is) out there on record" (ibid.:190). It is not objective reality that is being video-taped, but an image of that reality that the visual sociologist as filmmaker has chosen to record. We must see films, edited or unedited, as footage that reflects the way the maker of the film structures the world that he or she presents to

us (ibid.:195). As Barthes (1981) and Sontag (1977) have argued, the camera yields, not a picture of objective reality, but a trace or a picture of something that has been. The video camera produces a sequence of such images. This sequence, this flow of interaction that the film contains, reassembles lived-experiences in a way that reflects the filmmaker's conception of how those experiences should be presented to the viewer. The film presents the filmmaker's conception of reality, not the reality of those who are or have been filmed. The film always gives, then, an image of an event that has been; it never gives us the "nowness" of action, as that action is and was lived by those who experienced it. Yet the film mystifies us, it tricks us into believing that we are seeing "real" live action, when in fact we are not; we are witnesses to reenacted performances. In the Couch film we are witnesses to events that have been reenacted for the purposes of instruction. We are seeing students and scientists acting out the identities (some more slippery than others) of labor-management negotiators, of strangers, friends, and social psychologists doing experiments that are being video-taped for instructional purposes.

A sociology of the visual is thus required, for we are not viewing natural social events captured by the video camera. We are instead required to become students of a symbolic and cultural text that presents a mediated and edited version of "natural" social processes. Our task as viewers is to determine what Couch means by his film. We understand that he has put together a set of images in a nonrandom fashion in order to tell us something about human group life. We understand, too, that this is a complex process, involving intentional acts of a creative nature. Skill and knowledge in filmmaking are in evidence. Indeed, the film that we view displays the operation of a complex theoretical-aesthetic, to use Becker's (1982) term; that is, we are viewing the result of a complex process of selection, coaching, sequencing, and editing. Now that the film has been released, it is no longer a personal act, but a social and public act (Worth 1981:119). As a social act, *Studying Special Processes* now enters the public arena as a dramatic display of the kind of social psychology the Iowa group performs—a sociology of the visual studies of how the visual, the video tape, is produced. It studies how the film becomes, rather than a copy of the world, a statement about the world that one filmmaker offers. A semiotic of the visual, a study of how people actually make and interpret a variety of visual images and events, is what is called for (Gross 1981:34). Confusing a sociology of the visual with a visual sociology, Couch and his group offer neither a clue to how they assembled and produced what they produced nor a set of instructions concerning how what they filmed can in fact be taken as representative of a

human group in general. That is, while they assume that their laboratory is a stage on which the universal human drama is played out, they offer all too few convincing arguments that would lead us to believe that this is in fact true.

Sociologist as Filmmaker

This is a group film; it does not bear the hand of a single director, although Couch's hovering presence is everywhere, even his voice, when he is offstage. The film contains footage based on student reenactments of performances earlier students in the Iowa studies had produced. Thus the film is one level above the original studies that invoked the theoretical paradigm that structures the filmmaker's interpretation.

The footage is structured by three processes: (1) the eye and ear of the camera, (2) the omnipresence of Couch and his associates, and (3) the instructions given the student performers. The action that is produced is natural only in the contrived sense that these are students doing what they are told to do. The film is about authority in the laboratory—the scientist's authority. It is also about negotiations, bargains, time, temporality, and identities that slip on and off.

As a filmmaker the sociologist has assembled an interactional text that confirms his or her a priori assumptions about human group life. He has sliced, edited, and given us sequences of action that display the generic sociological principles. The film, its images and sounds, are signs of this theory-in-motion, and in a chain of signifying acts and events the sociologist has taken us into a social world that conforms to his understandings of it. As filmmaker, the sociologist constructs reality, and the reality he constructs is the one he had in his head before he began filming. That is, he "sees" strangers, friends, and negotiators projecting distal futures, recognizing mutual differences, offering proposal-response sequences for action, agreeing on future behavior, and closing off negotiations. Another viewer might see young men and women, clothed in the costumes of college students, playing out the scripts for action the scientist-as-filmmaker has given them. The viewer might see actors forgetting their lines and confusing one another's identities. He or she might observe how temporality enters into the construction of action as the players check the clock, noting how much more time they have to come to the decision they have been asked to reach. He might also observe how these student actors bring their past histories and biographies into the situation (e.g., pro-labor, pro-abortion, etc.). More important, he would ask how the taken-for-granted structures of the student life world allow them to act as student actors in the scientist's laboratory. Noting that no individual enters a situation without prior in-

terpretive understandings, regarding self and other, it might be argued that Couch has studied the malleability of social life: his film bears witness to the authority of the camera, the laboratory, and the scientist's presence as forces that can transform one definition of a situation into another. By structuring action as he has, he has constructed an image of social process that is orderly, sequential, and meaningful within his conceptual scheme.

How a Film Means

How does a film mean? Meaning, of course, is in part located in use, and the meanings to which a film can be put are many: as entertainment, as a documentary, as educational or training, as a mirror to reality, as a language of visual communication, as a record of lived-experience, as a test, or as an illustration of a theory. Couch's film is meant, at the level of use, to be an illustration of theory and an educational or training film.

Meaning also emerges out of interaction, and for a film this interaction is three-way; that is, meaning criss-crosses between three intentional categories or processes. First is the filmmaker and his or her intentions, which are meant to call out in the viewer interpretations he or she has intended for us. Second is the film itself, including how it is constructed, presented, sequenced, edited, and so forth. Third is the viewer and his or her interpretive system, which is brought to bear in the viewing-interpreting act. These three meaning systems collide, interact, and negotiate with one another as meaning and interpretation are brought to bear upon how a film means.

Given this situation, what is our job as viewers of Couch's film? Clearly it is to determine what he means and how he means what he means by the film he has shown us. Since he has told us, through his printed text in the film and his verbal intrusions, what it is we are to see and understand, our task is made easier. At one level we read the film in terms of the verbal and visual text Couch has provided. Our first task, then, is to assess this interpretive scheme. Does his film show what he says it does? And, second, we must ask whether his interpretive scheme offers the best interpretation of the film he has presented. I will take up these two problematics in turn.

Couch's Film

What events has this film captured? Gross (1981:28) suggests that a film may take one of three stances toward the reality it captures. First, it may present events, candidly filmed, as they unfold in their natural settings. In the natural context participants seemingly do not know they are being filmed. Second,

participants may be photographed or video-taped unobtrusively so that they act "almost as if" they have forgotten that a camera is turned on them. Third, the scenes recorded on a film may be scripted, staged, and "directed by an 'author' working with actors" (ibid.).

If the filmmaker and the interpreter adopt the first strategy, the natural, candid method, judgments about the persons in the situation—their feelings, attitudes, relationships, and intentions—can be made without serious qualification. If the second mode is adopted, the risk that the participants are acting in a "messageful" fashion, knowing they are being filmed, is increased. This decreases the interpreter's ability to make inferences and attributions concerning their "real" intentions and meanings in the situation. The participants are acting within two frames: the natural frame of the situation they bring in with them and the frame that the filmmaker offers them. How, when, and in what ways they switch back and forth between these two interpretive frames thus become problematic. The third mode further reduces the ability to make inferences about the participants in the situation. In this mode the interpreter is directed to "interpret the scene in light of our knowledge of dramatic conventions" (ibid.:28). Filmed events, then, cannot be uncritically accepted as "natural"; they are natural in varying degrees, and it is how an event is not natural that must concern us when we deal with films in the second and third categories.

Couch's film is presented "as if" it (1) has relevance for natural situations (i.e., the clips from the everyday world), (2) is in fact a depiction of natural, candid conduct, even though it (3) is staged so as to be unobtrusive, and hence (4) is a dramatic production. As a consequence it only has indirect relevance to the world of natural affairs, even though its "author" claims otherwise.

Because Couch chooses not to interpret the film within the restrictions contained in the third mode, as a dramatic production, his film does not mean what he intends it to mean.

Whose Interpretation?

Whose interpretation is best? Ours or Couch's? A full-fledged discussion of Couch's theory is beyond the scope of this comment. Suffice it to say I find it to be one of the most promising contributions to the field of small-group social psychology in the past two decades. In comparison to other schools and other approaches (e.g., Stanford's), the Iowa school aims to ground social psychology in a truly sociological merger of Simmel and Mead. For this the work is to be praised and the film to be applauded, for it shows how this new interpretive scheme has in fact been developed.

However, human group life is perhaps more than shared futures, openings, closings, congruent identities, and distal futures. It is also deep emotionality, taken-for-granted and deep structures of meaning, dramatic actions, violence, hatred, shared experiences, and turning point interactions with others. Ritual, routine, custom, tradition, habit, morality, and the sacred are also at the core of human group life. These matters are not evident in Couch's theory, and there are only traces of them in his film.

To extract these deeper-level meanings, other interpretive schemes—biographical, semiotic, hermeneutic, historical, cultural, critical, feminist—must be brought into play. The film may be and must be read in more ways than Couch has offered. Once those readings are performed, perhaps these other forms and levels of human group life will be revealed; but until they are we are left with Couch's reading. This reading, I have argued, is inherently biased and prejudicial. But then this is the fate of all filmmakers.

Film and Social Psychology

Finally, a brief note on film and social psychology. This film alerts us to the possibilities of video films, as well as other types of films, for the study of central problems in social psychology. It suggests that we need to study carefully how films are made and how films mean. We have a great deal to learn from those scholars who work in cinema studies, for they are making problematic how reality is constructed and presented through the medium of film. In particular, they are revealing how film structures reality along ideological lines and in so doing reproduces reality. Was it an accident, or was it intended, that the two strangers who negotiated a position on abortion were women, and the interactants who negotiated over wages were men? Perhaps this is beside the point. But I think not, for if Couch wishes his social psychology to speak to macro sociological issues, he must see that his film reproduces on the smallest micro scale possible all the macro issues he would ever want his social psychology to address. He has the world in the laboratory, but all that that world is has yet to be revealed to him. This is because he had the world in his head before he started filming it.

Margaret Mead's words to Sol Worth (1981:199) seem appropriate in this context. Worth had returned in 1967 from the field with 12,000 feet, 480,000 single frames of exposed film and seven movies made by Navajo Indians. He was overwhelmed by his data. Mead said: "Sol, you begin with intuition, but you can't rest your case upon it. You must build upon it and make clear to others the patterns that seem clear to you." It is clear that Couch sees what he intuitively feels, but he must make that pattern more clear to us.

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